

CULTURAL DICHOTOMY IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

AMBIKA SHARMA¹ & TANU GUPTA²

¹Assistant Professor & Research Scholar, Department of English, R. K. Arya College, Nawanshahr, Punjab, India

²Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics & Humanities Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana, Ambala, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

In today's scenario, the feminist literary criticism can be seen as the direct product of 1960s 'women's movement', which in turn was a renewal of women's inequality in society portrayed in the classic books. In the years to come, feminism and postmodernism showed clear signs of connections with each other. Feminism emerged as a consequence of the postmodernism. Feminist theories helped to develop the postmodern focus on the discourses and practices that have been marginalized in Western thought. Postmodernism challenged feminist criticism to avoid generalizing statements about "women". Bharati Mukherjee as we know is a Third World feminist writer. Bharati Mukherjee basically writes about the phenomenon of migration and its related issues. She delineates the status, feeling of alienation and other psychological upheavals of immigrants. In her writings she deals with the South Asian women in general and Indian women in particular. The perspective to analyze Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists in this paper will be to seek answer to the questions as to why the immigrant women characters in her novels, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*, do not return to their native country even though they face harsh situations in the host country.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Immigrants, Diasporic Concerns, Socio-Cultural Comparison

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee has written all her novels basically from feminist point of view. The women characters in her novels are undoubtedly victims of immigration whether willingly or unwillingly but Bharati Mukherjee does not undermine their position just because they are women. Her women characters are shown as potential individuals who face the bitter truth of their lives as immigrants but do not fall prey to the circumstances rather they are strong enough to adapt themselves in the new environment.

Every country of the world has its own set of history, traditions, customs, conventions, and civilization. Every citizen of a particular country is a product of effective contribution of all these social norms. Indian women have been so far studied by many Western as well as Indian writers. But Indian women have always been handicapped by forgetting about their upbringing and her social and cultural background. Indian culture is different if not older than Western culture or any other culture of the world. The diversity of Indian culture has direct role to play in the complexity of Indian women. Suma Chitnis in *Feminism in India*, argues: "the women's issues are different in India from the issues in the West". Chitnis points out that historically India has: "always been [a] highly hierarchical [society]" with the hierarchies maintained through customs and social behavioral codes. She also compares the West with India, as in the West, individuality and personal freedom are emphasized while in India, values like submission to superiors, "self-denial" and sublimating the [individual] ego". Indian society is sociologically and psychologically acclimatized to the notion of a stratified social order, and what

may appear as gender hierarchy to an outsider, is simply regarded as cultural observances by Indians. What Westerners may think of a forfeiting of the individual self is considered by Indian women as a prioritizing of family and community over the individual.

Physical and material enjoyment of life was and is the essence of Western culture. As a result social stability is compromised for the sake of individual freedom. The situation is just reverse in case of India. The situation of Indian women has changed from ancient times till today. There has been incredible progress in condition of women in general but even today, in many parts of the world and even in India, the situation regarding women seems to have changed on surface level only. Women are still victims of patriarchal suppression, exploitation in every walk of life, marginalization and other plights. In a country like, India, the problems and issues of women are direct outcome of their upbringing since their childhood. They are trained and tamed as to be a good woman. They do not have any individual identity. They are always seen as playing their roles in according to different relations. M.N.Srinivas reports on the training of young girls in the state of Mysore:

It is the mother's duty to train her daughters up to be an absolute docile daughter-in-law. The *summum bonum* of a girl's life is to please her parents-in-law and her husband. If she doesn't 'get on' with her mother-in-law, she will be a disgrace to the family and cast a blot on the fair name of her mother.

With the changing times, because of many factors including globalization, women's attitude has also changed. She has raised her voice against her victimization.

The objective of this paper will be to observe the unwillingness of the women protagonists of these novels to return back to their native country and a sense of detachment from their past roots to some extent. In this paper a comparative study of American and Indian socio-cultural difference is made to justify the protagonists' decision to stay in the host country because of the individual identity and existence they feel in the social conditions of the host country.

The Tiger's Daughter is the first novel by Bharati Mukherjee. In this novel the protagonist, Tara Banerjee comes back to India after her stay in America for seven years. Tara marries an American, David, against her Indian traditions. Her act of coming alone to India without her husband is unaccepted to her relatives who have traditional Indian mindset. According to Indian tradition only a man can lead a woman and Tara has not only challenged but also opposed this traditional thinking. Another violation attempted by Tara is that she has married against the wishes of her parents to a Jew who is an outcast for her society. Bharati Mukherjee criticizes the conservative approach of those Indians who are crazy about foreign clothes and other imported things but cannot accept the marital alliance with foreign people: "In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden" (62). Tara is very much affected by this attitude of her relatives and even her parents especially her mother. Tara feels alienated in company of her mother whereas this is the relation that should give her solace.

Tara returns to India in anticipation to end all her doubts and fears experienced by her in America but ironically she finds the situation reversed. The sight at railway station makes her sick and uncomfortable for her. At that moment America seems to be a land of dreams. Due to her assimilation and acculturation in America she seems to dislike everything in India. Tara observes Calcutta as a changed city since her departure from here. When she arrives in Calcutta she is shocked to see the riots and other social disturbances in the city. All through her stay in India, she could not help herself to compare the present social scenario of Calcutta with the kind of society she now lives in America. There are

many incidents in the novel which make Tara repent for coming to India. Her visit to funeral pyre with Tuntunwala, her encounter with the small girl suffering with leprosy, the pitiable scene of beggars and children on the streets of Calcutta, the riots prevalent in the city, Tara's disapproval of the double standards of her friends, the open violence in Calcutta and last but not the least her rape by Tuntunwala, all these incidents listed bring out the intense conflicts and trauma of Tara. She suffers not only in Calcutta but her visit to Darjeeling with her family also enhances her traumatic condition. Antonia Whitehead is like a representative of American women. She is seen with repulsion by Tara's mother for her skin show. And also during the beauty contest in Darjeeling, the behavior of Antonia clearly highlights the difference between American and Indian society and especially the approach towards women.

Another perspective of feminism i.e. hierarchy among women is seen when the White women are considered superior to the Indian women. Suma Chitnis comments: "the women's issues are different in India from the issues in the West".

Marriage in India completely changes the status of women. Tara is not eligible to participate in the beauty contest just because she is a married woman. Does marriage bring such a drastic change to a girl that she is not considered beautiful enough to participate in a beauty contest? Is there any relation between a woman's beauty and her marital status? These questions need to be discussed. The incident of eve teasing with Tara shakes her belief in Indian values. Her belief seems to be shattered to see that the patriarchal assumption of teasing women in public as their copyright: "Blow a kiss here, lady. And one for my shy friend, it's his first visit to the mountains" (178). The change in Tara's perspective due to her Americanization is not acceptable to the Indian society. Her suggestion about wearing bathing suits in beauty contest is over ruled:

Really, Mrs. Cartwright. I think your years abroad have robbed you of feminine propriety or you are joking with us. You know as well as I do our modest Indian girls would not submit to such disgrace (187).

Difference between Indian culture and Western culture is clear in the behaviour of Antonia Whitehead during beauty contest when she reveals to the public her almost bare body, which is not acceptable to Indian culture.

Tara's faith in Indian culture is shattered when she is raped by Tuntunwala. She feels hatred for this dual standards of Indian people:

In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of the fingers, can ignite rumors-even lawsuits-how is one to speak of Mr. Tuntunwala's violence?" (199).

At the end of the novel, when Tara is trapped in a violent demonstration where her companion got killed by the rioting mob, she desired that she would not have come to India. She longed to go back to America to her husband whom she confesses to love intensely. Her transnational experience compels her to compare both the cultures where she finds that Indian culture being undoubtedly rich in customs and traditions, does have a darker side regarding certain social issues like the position of women and the kind of treatment given to them.

Wife, the next novel undertaken in this paper is the story of a typical middle class Bengali girl, Dimple Das Gupta. In this novel, again the subject of marriage is highlighted by the author. Dimple like every other Indian girl dreams about her marriage to the charming prince of her dreams. But Dimple considers marriage not a commitment but as a medium to achieve freedom and key to fulfillment of her dreams. She has created an imaginative world of fantasy after her marriage

but ironically her marriage proves to be a failure: "That was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself"(20). Dimple has anticipated that "marriage would bring her freedom"(3).

She wanted to begin a new life in America without any trace of her past. After arrival in America, she tries to reconcile her fantasies and live her dream life but her expectations from her husband are never fulfilled. She comes to a world of totally different culture. In her starting days in America, she is attracted to American ways of life but is hesitant to cross her Indian threshold. Her exposure to television in America leads to increased inclination towards violence. She suffers from insomnia. Gradually she is unable to differentiate between her day dreaming or nightmares or grotesque images, she imagines in her psyche. She loses sense of balance between real and virtual. She has suffered in India and she also suffers in America but she does not want to return to India.

During her initial days in America, Dimple feels nostalgic. She remembers her life in Calcutta but gradually she assimilates in the American way of life. Influence of American culture on Dimple is clear in her involvement into extra marital affair. She enjoys the freedom available to women in America.

The killing of her husband can be viewed as an outcome of her Americanization. She does not act or behave like an Indian wife in brutally killing her husband. This shows her acquisition of American culture and cutting her bonds with Indian tradition. In killing her husband, she abandons all her Indian conventions and completes her Americanization: "Women on television got away with murder"(213).

Jasmine is a saga of a triumphant woman who rebels against the traditional patriarchal practices and customs of Indian culture. Throughout the novel the strong pulse of Jasmine's courage and determination can be felt. She challenges the age-old traditions and restrictions meant only for girls. Like the earlier protagonists, Tara and Dimple, Jasmine aspires to emigrate to America. Like Dimple she dreams of living in America because of her husband's decision to migrate. Jasmine has a rebellious nature right from the very beginning. She, on every step challenges the superstitions of the society. It is her rebellion nature which brings her to America from a small village of Punjab in India where she was born. She could have surrendered herself to the patriarchy but unlike the typical Indian widow, she decides to go to America to fulfill Prakash's last wish. She narrates her odyssey as the story of a twenty four year old pregnant widow who is presently living in Iowa with her lover, Bud Ripplemayer, who is crippled. Her journey begins from Punjab to California passing through various stations as Florida, New York and Iowa. The narrative oscillates between past and present and Jasmine's identity changes with her new names. She is born as Jyoti, was renamed Jasmine by her husband. From Jasmine she becomes Jazzy and Jane afterwards. Through Jasmine's narration we come to know about her departure from India for the United States of America after her husband's open murder. On the way to America she is raped by a man named, Half face whom she kills eventually. Brinda Bose suggests that for Dimple and Jasmine:

Murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over; it is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end; it is a beginning. Once the home-country"-(represented by Amit)- "has been relegated to the recesses of rejected memory, and the new life is looked forward to with the hope, the process of defining a new identity can begin"(53).

She does many odd jobs for her survival in America. She also serves as a caregiver for the Taylor family and finally arrives in Iowa where she lives like the wife of Bud without marriage.

Jasmine was born in a society where daughters were and to some extent, even today, are considered as curse: "But daughters were curses. A daughter had to married off before she could enter heaven and dowries beggared families for generations" (39). In America, Jasmine sways between her past Indian culture and her present experiences of American culture. She is all the time while narrating her story, compares at each step her past and present experiences. She was born and has been brought up in a society where women do not have any identity of their own. They were ruled and governed completely by the patriarchal tradition. There are many references in this novel about traditional Indian society such as women marginalization, no education for women, no employment opportunities, Sati custom, condition of widows as outcast and many more. Jasmine is shocked to know that the condition of women in America is totally different from the culture to which she initially belonged. Her true encounter with the American culture was when she came across with the Taylors. She was appointed as the caregiver of their adopted girl child Duff: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue..."(165). She was astonished to see a professor serving biscuits to her, a servant. This was totally American thing for her because she could not even imagine herself serving her maids at home in India. When Jasmine's salary was doubled, she offered to move out of the Taylors house. She says: "...suddenly doubling my caregiver salary. I offered to move out, which seemed the American thing to do" (180). Moving out of the family is an American system of society but on the contrary Indian culture is still family-centric. Joint family system is still part of Indian culture. Jasmine transformed from an Indian to an American in Taylors' house. This transformation was not imposed on Jasmine. This was her intentional decision: "Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn't scare him. I changed because I wanted to" (185).

She gradually shifts from her Indian tradition to accepting the American culture. Jasmine's transformation from her Indianness to Americanization is not easy. She experiences conflicts of values but Jasmine overcomes these conflicts by imbibing some American traits but not losing her Indian values completely. Jasmine represents those women who happily accepts her future without any regretting memories of the past. She realizes that nothing is permanently rooted anywhere. Anything can cross the boundaries of nations and can reach from one corner of earth to the other. She applies this notion of motion to her own self who has become a fluid identity with changing names. She is an immigrant who thinks like an Indian but acts like an American. She justifies her act of leaving Bud and going with Taylor at the end of the story: "I am not choosing between men, I am caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness" (240). She is not a pathetic character. She feels nostalgic about her Indian past but those memories were not happy altogether. The kind of comparison she feels between India and America regarding the attitude towards women, she easily and happily assimilate into the American culture without looking back to her past. She finds her Americanization as liberating for herself which was quite impossible in India. If she would not have taken the bold initiative of going to America, she might have been living the miserable life of a widow in India.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus for Bharati Mukherjee's heroines, in these three novels, America is a land where they have chance to decide and live a life which they want to live and at the same time, they feel that the life of their choice is not feasible in India. Their stay in America provides them the chance to observe the cultural dichotomy of both the cultures and also to choose the better one for themselves.

REFERENCES

1. Bose, Brinda. "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee." *Bharati MukherjeeCritical Perspectives*. New York: Garland, 1993.
2. Chitnis, Suma. "Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions." *Feminism in India*. Ed. Maitrayee Chaudhari. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004.
3. Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Tiger's Daughter*. New Delhi: Penguin Books (India) Ltd., 1990.
4. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. Canada: Penguin Books, 1987.
5. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 1990.
6. Srinivas, M.N. *Marriage and Family in Mysore*. Bombay: New Book Co., 1942.